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ABSTRACT

This project is building on site-specific qualitative data to develop a profile of adult learning activity now largely unrecognized by education providers. It explores the various learning strategies used by adults in these three locations: unionized factory, community-based training program, and literacy program. At a half-way point in a two-year project, results have been obtained from 13 interviews, comments from 22 profiles, and a videotaped discussion among 5 people. All participants are women. One outstanding theme is that these women love to learn. Interviewees identify four themes that help them learn: an appreciation for their independence, a supportive community, a feeling of self-confidence, and applying or practicing the newly acquired skill in a real situation. The project is supplying researchers with a systematic approach to capturing the initiatives of working people as learners the Skills and Knowledge Profile that helps learners identify and value their skills and experience. (YLB)

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NALL Working Paper #24-2001

Tacit Skills, Informal Knowledge and Reflective Practice

by
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Prepared for "Learning Capacities in the Community and Workplace: An action research project" sponsored by Advocates for Community Based Training and Education for Women (ACTEW) and, initially, the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers (CEP) Union.
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Community sites provide a range of pictures of "adult learning" in this research report. By interviews and by work with a Skills and Knowledge Profile, we note patterns of gender, culture, employment status, and strength of social organization when identifying learning needs and recording learning experiences.

Les sites communautaires fournissent toute une gamme d'images des "besoins d'apprendre" dans ce projet de recherche. Par des entrevues, et en employant une "profile des connaissances et des compétences" nous avons remarqué des différences entre homme et femme, et l'influence de la culture, de l'emploi et de la force d'organisation sociale quand les gens identifient leurs besoins en éducation, et quand ils font le bilan de leur action éducative.

A/ INTRODUCTION

This project builds on site-specific qualitative data to develop a profile of learning activity which now is largely unrecognized by education providers. We are exploring the various learning strategies used by adults in three locations: a unionized factory, a community based training program, and a literacy program.

Our identification of tacit skills, informal knowledge and reflective practice uses some of the tools developed in the Working Class Learning Strategies project led by David Livingstone of OISE from 1994-97. As well as the interview format employed in that project, we have developed a Skills and Knowledge Profile (SKP), as a tool for prior learning assessment and recognition. In each site, we are revising and refining this tool based on learner and participant feedback.

In this research, we examine the educational opportunities provided by the sponsors as well as to collect and integrate suggestions for enhancing a learner-centred climate. More broadly, we aim to contribute to the broader national policy debate and implementation strategy for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), pressing both employers and educational institutions to validate a broader range of informal learning activity.

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B/ WOMEN LEARNING

At this half way point in a two-year project, we are presenting results from thirteen interviews, comments from twenty-two Profiles, and a videotaped discussion among five people. All the participants were women, all in southern Ontario, ranging in age from mid-twenties to early fifties. The interviews took place in donut shops, a hospital lobby, their homes, at work, at school, in a restaurant, in a bar, and in community centres.

Three of the women are immigrants whose first language is English, five are immigrants whose second language is English and the rest are Canadian born. Three women are at the beginning of their career, two are seeking more education to further the chances of employment and one is redefining her career goals because her two university degrees have failed to help her secure employment. Three participants have marketable skills learned during a long and rich employment history in their home country and they are seeking training to help them find clerical work. Seven women have Canadian work experience but have been affected by downsizing, outsourcing and contract work.

One outstanding theme that has persisted throughout all the interviews is that these women love to learn. They have chosen to learn on their own; but more surprisingly they have taken many informal courses that may or may not be job related.

> *Yeah, I knew it would be easy for me to learn new things and I know I would provide a good mark when the test comes. But it is not just the class, but I would study at home. Tests would be very exciting because I would go and get a good mark. I like learning.(Lucy)**

> *I took them (workshops and courses) for me. There was a sense of immediate gratification for me of getting what I wanted and getting it right away and that is important to me, but they opened up the doors to other possibilities. (Berry)*

* Note: all names are changed.

C/ WHAT HELPS LEARNING

The interviewees identified four themes that help them learn: an appreciation for their independence; a supportive community; a feeling of self confidence; and applying or practicing the newly acquired skill in a real situation.

Independence
The women clearly stated that adult education programs work best when structured on the assumption that the learners are independent adults who have voluntarily chosen to study. Adults walk into programs with life survival skills and those skills must be recognized, if not incorporated into the curriculum.

> *It is different because it is adult learning, it respects your abilities, it is more independent, you can choose whether you want to participate or not, you will not be expelled if you do not show up, basically it is voluntary. (Carol)*

I like to be challenged and stimulated. I felt that it was challenging and stimulating, we were treated as adults right from the very beginning. Not that there wasn't support, there was a lot, but you were very responsible for yourself and your actions and I liked that. (Berry)

Supportive Community
The interviewees stressed the importance of having a community of women around them who could share their experiences and lend support. This included both participants and staff.

> *The most important thing is the supportive environment because adult students have all kinds of adult difficulties, we are not teenagers. Adults have all the stresses of getting job and family, so you need a supportive environment to encourage you. (Natalie)*

And the group was almost the same age, like in their thirties and forties and fifties. And when I came back from my father's funeral, they gave me a nice welcome, they gave me a card and made a little donation for me. I felt welcomed and when you are in this situation you need that support from you friends and classmates which I never found in the other places. I told them that I found new friends here. (Marla)

You feel that they (staff in the program) really do care and want you to succeed. They are trying and they are open to suggestions and they are willing to help. You can go in if you are having problems, like a lot of people are having personal problems with their families, children, health or whatever, so they are very open to helping and going to the office to talk to the staff. (Debbie)

On the one hand, some women did complain about the tendency of the group to spend too much time on commiserating and not enough time on learning necessary skills. However, when we explored this point a more constructive criticism emerged. The women not only appreciated the supportive environment but saw it necessary for their own struggle. However, they did not want program time allocated for learning soft skills replaced by women sharing their negative experiences. The learners recommended that the teaching of soft skills be within a structured format similar to the teaching of the computer skills; and the support integrated into the curriculum at another time, not at the expense of the skills training.

Self confidence

One idea that continuously emerged throughout the interviews was that learning is not only about skills and knowledge but also about gaining self confidence. Too often, women live work and play under the assumption that they are incompetent learners; incapable of learning computers or learning a trade. Interviewees recommended that adult programs and high schools must work to elevate the self confidence of the learners. We heard that the first step to learning is learning to be self confident.

The lady tried to help me to read and write. I would not say I was getting good but I was getting better and I was feeling confident. (Illy)

I would like to see a lot more emphasis on either acquiring or reinforcing part of you, the inside person of who you are. In terms of assertiveness, confidence building to give a better foundation to go out there. (Berry)

I think school children should be taught people skills, communication, how to feel good about themselves, the inner self, like emotions. They should be validated. The only way people can say you are inferior is if you give them permission. (Carol)

Applying the Skills in a Real Situation

A number of interviewees emphasized the positive learning experience of applying their newly learned skills in a real situation like a co-op or a job. They felt that practicing skills in the classroom does not hone them enough: a classroom is a fabricated environment which does not reflect the realities of a workplace. Women commented that it is the responsibility of a good program to provide placements offering the potential to learn. Three women did not have fruitful experiences at their placements and of one of them felt that the lack of remuneration undermined her self esteem. The majority of the women felt that the pressures of a real work site provide ideal conditions to practice the skills.

The co-op was amazing, for me, I had the very best time. I went to NOW magazine and it was excellent. I really took all the stuff that I have learned, and all the experiences of my life and really applied it.

D/ RECORDING LEARNING: THE SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE PROFILE

This project is providing the researchers with a systematic approach to capturing the initiatives of working people, employed and unemployed, as learners. The Skills and Knowledge Profile (SKP) is the tool we are using to help learners identify and value their skills and experience. This is an action based research approach to explore the various learning strategies used by learners across locations.

The Skills and Knowledge Profile has proven a complicated and subtle document to produce, and a slippery tool to use consistently in different circumstances. The tool itself has six sections. The first section asks for personal information. Section two, entitled "Courses and Workshops" elicits a history of the individual's classroom learning. Section three, "Personal Informal Learning" asks people to describe the learning that takes place in their daily lives, through watching TV, reading, or talking with neighbours. Section four chronicles the job-related informal learning of the participants. The fifth section, "Future Learning Plans" asks the learner how they plan to apply their skills and experience, in combination with their training program. The last section, "Your Comments on the Profile", solicits suggestions and revisions to the instrument from the learner. We have used comments from this section to repeatedly revise and refine the tool. For example, it now includes a category called "major events". These events may have taken place either in society, such as a depression or recession, or in the personal life of the respondent, such as the birth of a child, death of a parent, or the difficult process of immigration.

The Skills and Knowledge Profile has an accompanying Coach's Guide, incorporating multiple examples that make no assumptions about the respondent's employment status, (dis)ability, and/or language proficiency. The Coach's Guide was revised in response to suggestions from participants in a literacy program who were in the program to learn but not necessarily to secure employment. The SKP and Coach's Guide form the basis for our discussions in policy forums and have been very successful in focussing debates around literacy, PLAR and democratizing access to training and education.

E/ IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The educational research outcomes of this project will be:

a. Determining the strengths and weaknesses of the different locations as vehicles for employed and unemployed people's learning.
b. Understanding the possibilities for cross-organizational support and resource sharing.
c. Defining possible alliances among and between locations
d. Developing a generic Skills and Knowledge Profile that can be adapted for literacy learners, participants in community based training programs, and worksites.

We look forward to discussing these with other theorists and practitioners at the CASAE conference, in a participatory workshop.

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